

## China's daily death toll from virus tops 100 for first time

# UN experts meet to fast-track drugs, vaccines for new virus

GENEVA, Feb 11, (AP): The World Health Organization convened a group of experts Tuesday to fast-track promising tests, drugs and vaccines to help slow the outbreak of a new virus that emerged in China and has spread to two dozen other countries.

The new coronavirus was only identified late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan and there are no licensed drugs or vaccines. Diagnostic tests have been developed by several laboratories, but there are no rapid tests available.

To date, the virus has infected more than 42,000 people and killed 1,007, with 99% of the cases found in China. Two dozen other countries have reported 393 cases of the virus, with one death in the Philippines.

At least 60 million people in central China are in a government-ordered lockdown aimed at halting the spread of the virus and health authorities around the world are racing to track down the contacts of infected people.

In Japan, more than 3,700 people remain quarantined aboard a cruise ship in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, after dozens of passengers tested positive for the virus.

"It's hard to believe that just two months ago, this virus - which has come to captivate the attention of media, financial markets and political leaders - was completely unknown to us," said WHO's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The UN health agency said there were still many critical but unanswered questions about the virus, including what animals it came from, how exactly it is spread between people and how best to treat infected patients.

"To defeat this outbreak, we need answers to all those questions and more," Tedros said.

The two-day meeting will end Wednesday.

Experts say it could still be months or even years before any approved treatments or vaccines are developed.

China's daily death toll from a new virus topped 100 for the first time and pushed the total past 1,000 dead, authorities said Tuesday after leader Xi Jinping visited a health center to rally public morale amid little sign the contagion is abating.

Though more offices and stores in China were reopening after the extended Lunar New Year break, many people appear to be staying home. Public health authorities are closely monitoring whether workers' returning to cities and businesses resuming worsens the spread of the virus.

### Morale

In a bid to boost morale, Xi was featured on state broadcaster CCTV's main news report Tuesday night visiting a community health center in Beijing and expressing confidence in the "war against the disease."

The country's president and leader of the ruling Communist Party was shown wearing a surgical mask and having his temperature taken before expressing his thanks to health workers on behalf of the party and government. "We will most definitely win this people's war," Xi said.

Xi's appearance comes amid questioning of the government's handling of the crisis, particularly the failure of local officials in the worst-hit city of Wuhan to clarify the extent of the crisis. Public anger has been inflamed over the death of a young doctor from the virus who had earlier been threatened along with seven others by police for warning online of the potential for a major outbreak as early as December.

Xi paid his respects to health workers, but much of his message was focused on calling for citizens to follow the party's dictates and aimed at minimizing the potentially massive economic impact of the outbreak.



Personnels wearing protective suits wait near an entrance at the Cheung Hong Estate, a public housing estate during evacuation of residents in Hong Kong, Feb 11. The Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health evacuated some residents from the public housing estate after two cases of novel coronavirus infection to stop the potential risk of further spread of the virus. (AP)

'It's very different from anything we have witnessed'

## Virus storytellers challenge China's official narrative

BEIJING, Feb 11, (AP): After nearly a week of roaming China's epidemic-struck city, filming the dead and the sickened in overwhelmed hospitals, the strain of being hounded by both the new virus and the country's dissent-quelling police started to tell.

Chen Qiushi looked haggard and disheveled in his online posts, an almost unrecognizable shadow of the energetic young man who had rolled into Wuhan on a self-assigned mission to tell its inhabitants' stories, just as authorities locked the city down almost three weeks ago.

Until he disappeared last week, the 34-year-old lawyer-turned-video blogger was one of the most visible pioneers in a small but dogged movement that is defying the ruling Communist Party's tightly policed monopoly on information.

Armed with smart phones and social media accounts, these citizen-journalists are telling their stories and those of others from Wuhan and other locked-down virus zones in Hubei province. The scale of this non-sanctioned storytelling is unprecedented in any previous major outbreak or disaster in China. It presents a challenge to the Communist Party, which wants to control the narrative of China, as

it always has since taking power in 1949.

"It's very different from anything we have witnessed," said Maria Repnikova, a communications professor at Georgia State University who researches Chinese media.

Never have so many Chinese, including victims and health care workers, used their phones to televise their experiences of a disaster, she said. That's partly because the more than 50 million people locked down in cities under quarantine are "really anxious and bored and their lives have pretty much stopped."

Official state media extol the Communist Party's massive efforts to build new hospitals in a flash, send in thousands of medical workers and ramp up production of face masks without detailing the underlying conditions that are driving these efforts.

Chen did just that in more than 100 posts from Wuhan over two weeks. He showed the sick crammed into hospital corridors and the struggles of residents to get treatment.

"Why am I here? I have stated that it's my duty to be a citizen-journalist," he said, filming himself with a selfie stick outside a train station. "What sort of a journalist are you if you don't dare rush to the front line

in a disaster?"

A video posted Jan 25 showed what Chen said was a body left under a blanket outside an emergency ward. Inside another hospital, he filmed a dead man propped up on a wheelchair, head hanging down and face deathly pale.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked a woman holding the man up with an arm across the chest.

"He has already passed," she said.

Chen's posts and vlogs, or video blogs, garnered millions of views - and police attention.

In an anguished video post near the end of his first week in Wuhan, he said police had called him, wanting to know where he was, and questioned his parents.

"I am scared," he said. "I have the virus in front of me, and on my back, I have the legal and administrative power of China."

His voice trembling with emotion and tears welling in his eyes, he vowed to continue "as long as I am alive in this city."

"Even death doesn't scare me!" he said. "So you think I'm scared of the Communist Party?"

Last week, Chen's posts dried up. His mother broke the silence with a video post in the small hours of Friday. She said Chen was un-

reachable and appealed for help in finding him.

Later that evening, his friend and well-known mixed martial artist Xu Xiaodong said in a live broadcast on YouTube that Chen had been forcibly quarantined for 14 days, considered the maximum incubation period for the virus. He said Chen had been healthy and showed no signs of infection.

On Sunday, Xu tweeted that despite pleading with authorities for a call with Chen, he and others haven't been able to get in touch.

Police also came knocking last week for Fang Bin, who has been posting videos from Wuhan hospitals, including footage of body bags piled in a minibus, waiting to be carted to a crematorium.

Fang, a seller of traditional Chinese clothing, filmed a testy exchange through the metal grill of his door with a group of four or five officers. The footage posted on YouTube offered a glimpse into how the security apparatus is working overtime to keep a lid on public anger about the spread of the virus.

"Why are there so many of you?" Fang asked. "If I open the door, you'll take me away!"

Chen re-posted that video on his Twitter feed - one of his last tweets before his disappearance.

deaths in mainland China since the illnesses began appearing in December. The total is well beyond the toll of the 2002-03 outbreak of SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, which is caused by a different coronavirus related to the current pathogen.

The number of newly confirmed cases fell slightly to 2,478 from 3,062 the day before, bringing the total to

42,638 on the mainland, some of whom have since been cured and released from hospital.

The crossing of more grim thresholds is dimming optimism that the near-quarantine of some 60 million people and other disease-control measures might be working.

In Hong Kong, authorities evacuated an apartment block after two cases among its residents raised suspicion the virus may be spreading through the building's plumbing.

It was reminiscent of the SARS outbreak that killed hundreds in the semi-autonomous Chinese city. The biggest number of connected cases in that outbreak were in one apartment complex where the virus spread through sewage pipes.

Britain, meanwhile, declared the virus a "serious and imminent threat to public health" and said it would forcibly detain infected people if necessary. France tested scores of children and their parents after five British tourists contracted the virus at a ski resort.

The director-general of the World Health Organization said that the agency is still unable to predict where the outbreak is heading but that he believes there is still an opportunity to contain it.

"In recent days, we have seen some concerning instances of onward transmission from people with no travel history to China," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "The detection of the small number of cases could be the spark that becomes a bigger fire, but for now, it's only a spark."

### Restrictions

Among the growing number of travel restrictions, the US said that, as of Monday, it was suspending regular visa services at the embassy in Beijing and consulates general in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shenyang. The Consulate General in Wuhan has already been closed and its staff evacuated.

"Due to the ongoing situation relating to the novel coronavirus, the US Embassy and Consulates have very limited staffing and may be unable to respond to requests regarding regular visa services," the embassy press office announced.

A Presidential Proclamation issued Feb. 2 had already banned entry to the US to anyone who had been in China fewer than 14 days prior to their arrival.

The Beijing city government told residential compounds in the capital to close their gates, check visitors for fever and record their identities. The government also warned people to strictly abide by regulations requiring wearing of masks in public and to avoid group activities.

More than 440 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, including two deaths in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Of those, 135 are from a cruise ship quarantined in Yokohama, near Tokyo. Japan's Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said the government was considering testing everyone remaining on board of the 3,711 passengers and crew on the Diamond Princess, which would require them to remain aboard until results were available.

Britain issued its "imminent threat" declaration after a British man who caught the virus in Singapore in January appeared linked to several other confirmed cases in Europe. Five Britons, including a 9-year-old boy, contracted the virus in the French Alpine ski town of Contamines-Montjoie after staying in the same chalet as the British man.

Jerome Salomon, head of France's national health agency, said 61 people including the boy's schoolmates were tested and proved negative for the virus.

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